



Knowing and doing, connected via technology: Influence of online service-learning on student outcomes

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Summary

Growing interest in how components of online instruction dovetail with service-learning has led to assertions that online learning “is not only compatible with but enhances and extends the aims of service-learning” (Dailey-Hebert et al., 2008 p. 1). Despite assertions of the potential benefits (e.g., online tools may support or enhance student reflection—Post, 2008; Stoecker et al., 2008; hosting course content online may free up time for the service-learning activity and prepare students to work with particular community partners—Dailey-Hebert et al., 2008; online instruction, like service-learning, may help restructure the traditional relationships between faculty and students—Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), few have been investigated in anything other than case study reports (e.g., Bailey & Card, 2009; Bennett & Green, 2001; Matthews, 2011). Additionally, how service-learning and online

instruction are combined can differ substantially based on how courses are structured (Waldner et al., 2012).

End-of-course surveys (n=1290 students in 84 course sections at all levels) investigated differences in self-reported student learning outcomes in university service-learning courses with and without online discussion components. For all variables studied (academic learning, commitment to service, moral reasoning, professional skills, relationship with instructor), t-tests demonstrated a significant benefit to students (with small to medium effect sizes) in service-learning courses including online discussion.

The IARSLCE call for proposals suggests a need for research on “what kinds of programmatic, structural, or institutional factors have the greatest impact on student outcomes.” At a time when many universities are encouraging online learning, quantitative assessment of the impact of incorporating online and service-learning pedagogies is especially helpful, and supports assertions that such a merger is beneficial, potentially providing outcomes surpassing traditional service-learning. The present study provides useful baseline knowledge about the impacts of incorporating online discussion into service-learning coursework, and serves as a jumping-off point for related future research.

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